

Two Questions

Who do people say that I am? . . . Who do you say that I am?

Mark 8:27-29

Jesus asked two questions:

“Who do people say that I am?”

“Who do you say that I am?”

Those two remarkable questions resonate through the entire history of the Church. And they are as challenging today, as disturbing, as they were when Jesus uttered them.

They expose a tension that lies at the very heart of the Christian faith -- a dilemma that has again and again disturbed and even divided the Church over the past two thousand years.

They are questions that are fundamental to the ways we must deal with the dilemmas that our church -- that all churches -- face in our own troubled time;

And they are questions that every believer has to wrestle with -- that you and I have to wrestle with -- as we seek to live out our faith in the midst of our own life circumstances.

“Who do people say that I am?”

“Who do you say that I am?”

The setting is important: Jesus and his closest followers were on a long and difficult trip. They were far to the north of their native Galilee, in the region of Caesarea Philippi. They were isolated among strangers, away from their own religious and cultural community. !) Given the dangers and the sheer physical challenges of the journey, it had to be Jesus' closest and most committed followers who were with him.

Caesarea Philippi was what the Romans called the ancient city of Panias. It is still there in the north of Israel, in a part of the Golan Heights that is claimed by both Israel and Syria. It is just a stone's throw from the border with Lebanon, very close to the epicenter of the tragic events in that troubled part of the world. It was, and still is, a place of remarkable natural beauty. In ancient times it was a center for the worship of the pagan deity, Pan -- which it is why it was named Panias. The city is still called by the Arabic name, *Banias*. We think of Paul as the great missionary to the non-Jewish world, but here was Jesus, already healing and teaching among people unfamiliar with the God of Israel or indifferent to the God whose kingdom Jesus proclaimed. (After all, paganism was always so much more fun!)

And it was there in that alien place that the astonishing dialog took place. Jesus asked two questions:

“Who do people say that I am?”

“Who do you say that I am?”

He wasn't looking for information. It wasn't a consumer relations survey. It wasn't a popularity poll. Jesus was urging those committed people, his closest companions, his disciples, to search their own souls and identify some articulate reason for their commitment. And that is exactly what the Gospel asks of us right now.

It is one of the most powerfully dramatic moments in the Gospel story. It begins with a question that drops gently, casual, almost conversational: “Who do they say that I am?” Answering that was easy. It made no demand. It didn’t involve any sort of personal commitment. Answering it would admit no claim on one’s life. “Who do people say that you are?” “Well – some say you are Elijah – some are even saying you’re John the Baptist so recently dead – or another prophet.” The answers come tumbling out. It’s there in the text: “They answered -- still others answered . . .” Every hand in the class raised!

Then came the staggering follow-up, the solar plexus blow. We can imagine Jesus saying it with a quiet intensity: “Who, then, do YOU say that I am?” And there was dazed silence. This was the call to account. This, for those stunned disciples, was life’s ultimate “stand and deliver.” And there was silence. Only Peter, the often rash and impetuous Peter, only Peter spoke: “You are the Messiah!” When the Big Fisherman spoke it would have struck the others like a clap of thunder. “You are the Messiah!” You are God’s Anointed One. You are the Christ.¹ Maybe he said what the others wanted to say, but didn’t have the audacity -- that like Moses before the burning bush, they dared not say that they had looked upon the face of God.

And Jesus sternly ordered them to tell nobody.

How grand it would be if we could stop right there, with Jesus revealed as God’s Son. We could wrap our devotion in the beauty of holiness and let our praises rise like clouds of incense. In fact, that’s exactly where a lot of Christians would like to leave it. It is a right and good and joyful thing to wrap our worship in all the beauty our arts afford, but we are sternly reminded not to leave it at that.

The lesson has another, darker, paragraph. Jesus had a larger view of his messiahship than his followers were willing to share. And there was controversy. He went on to say that the Messiah, that he himself would need to suffer shame and death. Peter took him aside and tried to counsel him not to say things like that. Jesus rebuked him: “You don’t really understand, Peter.”

It was a tough lesson for those followers, as loyal as they thought they were. Their own witness wouldn’t be complete until they fully understood the cost of their discipleship. And that cost was what Jesus laid out for them: “If anyone wishes to follow, they must take up a cross.” Those men knew about crosses. For them the term was no metaphor. Along the Roman roads, under the harsh Roman discipline, crosses were all too real. It is a hard teaching, and we can only imagine what went on in their minds.

At the same time, Jesus did not leave them comfortless. There is reward as well as sacrifice. Beyond the cross, taken up in his name, shouldered as a witness to the Gospel -- beyond that cross there is glory. There is the crown of life that is really life. So said Jesus.

Did they understand it and did they believe it? Probably not, not until there had been a real crucifixion, not until there was a resurrection and a Pentecost. Then, looking backward, what Jesus said there in Caesarea Philippi began to make some kind of sense. Only then were they able to make their own tremendous witness.

Two questions: They are still in front of us, still challenging us. Still calling us to account.

¹NRSV says “Messiah.” The Greek text plainly says “Christ.”

Who do they say that I am? They say that you are Elijah, that you are John the Baptist, or some other prophet.

It would be easy to settle for this answer. It is easy to accept the Jesus who is the image of perfect humanity. His agenda of love, compassion, peace and justice is one all men and women of good will can subscribe to. It is one that the church can adopt without really transforming the lives of its people.

I have a friend, now of blessed memory, who was the interim pastor of one of the more affluent churches in a commuting suburb of New York City. In a letter to me he wrote that he had been accused of introducing religion into the life of the congregation!

The conditions of for modern Christians have made it convenient to accept the Jesus who is the image of perfect humanity, the Jesus of compassion and justice and love --but a Jesus without Christ, and without a cross, a Jesus in who there may be a dim reflection of divinity, but not one who is God with us. Whether we admit it or not, most of us are secularists consciously or unconsciously. It is only in rare moments that we have intimations of what is sacred and holy. We are not solely to blame. It is the culture in which we live.

But then comes that other question, the insistent question, the question that insists on an accounting for our discipleship. And who do you say that I am?

It would be tempting to say that Peter's answer ought to be our answer. But that would be unrealistic. Peter himself could not stay with that confession. Remember how, when the cross loomed, he said, "I do not know the man?" The irony is that while Jesus loved his disciples he expected a great deal from them and sought to transform them a great deal before they were qualified to actually fully take on and continue his mission, and the process of change, transformation, and growth would continue after they had begun the work. It took a death and resurrection to make Peter the colossus of the faith that he became, and that led him to his own mighty witness on his own inverted cross. And so it was with all the others. So it is with you and me.

Who do you say that I am? For people of faith the question always intrudes. If faith means anything at all the question will always intrude. It is a conversation that goes on. Jesus wants to have that conversation with each of us, and he does not insist that we all have the same answer. His only concern is that, whoever we say Jesus is, he can be seen in the way we pick up our crosses of life, whatever they may be, and follow him. The people he chooses to spend time with are not the people we always find ourselves drawn toward. People not like ourselves, but people who Jesus loved and still loves. That is the real challenge in our promise: to follow him wherever he may lead.

Jesus was asking his followers to look at him and then to look into themselves. He was urging those committed people, his closest companions, his disciples, to search their own souls and identify some articulate reason for their commitment. He was asking them to look at him and to understand that faith is not rooted in some carefully-constructed architecture of theology, but in a relationship -- a relationship with the person of Jesus the Christ, who walked among us as one of us, teaching and demonstrating for us the dimensions of God's kingdom. He is also that Christ in whose face there shines the splendor of the Eternal God -- a relationship we confirm when we recognize the Christ in each other and in the stranger at our gate. Christ asks only that we look at him, and when we look at him he will look at us,

and when he looks at us, even though it be our last conscious moment, we will walk in his light.

Amen.

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September 17, 2006